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ABSTRACT

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was an extremely popular organization among black women. During this time the YWCA enjoyed a reputation as a leader in interracial affairs. Internally, however, the structure of the YWCA protected the prevailing racial status quo. Black women were served almost exclusively in separate branches, and while there were black staff members, there was no black representation on the National Board, nor on city Association boards. Black women undertook to participate effectively within the YWCA and overcame the structural and ideological barriers with which they were faced. By 1920, while its structure was flawed and racially based, the YWCA provided a forum in which black women could talk with white women, and demonstrate their readiness to address issues of class, gender, and race. (DB)

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OBERLIN COLLEGE

"STRUGGLE AMONG SAINTS: BLACK WOMEN IN THE YWCA, 1860-1920"

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"I am not with these YWCA women. I am ashamed to say it but I have never been...You would not expect anything different from a business man, a farmer, etc. but when the saints come along you expect them to be different." [1]

When Margaret Murray Washington wrote these words to her friend Lugenia Burns Hope, wife of Atlanta University President John Hope, in February, 1920, she was expressing the disappointment, frustration, and growing impatience of numerous African-American club women. Washington was among the leadership of an impressive number of black club women who worked tirelessly with the Young Women's Christian Association before and during World War I, in hopes that issues affecting black women inside the organization could be resolved, and that their concerns could become part of the on-going public policy agenda of the nation's largest women's organization. Yet, in spite of the popularity of the YWCA among black college students, with some seventy-eight black student organizations in 1920; the excellent association work by black women throughout the history of the Association; and the unprecedented growth of black members, North and South, through an aggressive war work campaign, the Association's National Board remained ambivalent and at times insensitive to their black constituency. Ironically at the same time, the organization enjoyed a reputation as a leader in interracial affairs, even though its internal structure actually protected the prevailing racial status quo. Black women were almost exclusively served in separate branches, and while there were black staff members, there was NO black representation on the National

Board, nor on city Association Boards.

Yet, the YWCA was unique among women's organizations. At a time when "jim crow" laws in the South, and racial separation dominated relations between the races in Northern and Western states, the fact that black women were members in the YWCA made it different from most national organizations.[2] The make-up of the YWCAs membership actually owed much to work prior to the organization of the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association of the U. S. A., which united two separate national YWCA organizations - the American Committee and the International Board. According to a report entitled "A Brief History of Colored Work," written in 1918, "...there were affiliated with the American Committee...seven [black] student Associations. [Also] there were evidences of city Associations for colored women at a much earlier period."[3]

Association documents indicate that black women initiated Association work as early as 1870, when a group of church women in Philadelphia organized the Colored Women's Christian Association, in an attempt to duplicate the all-white Women's Christian Association.[4] Later, in the years just before and during World War I, when black men and women streamed into Northern cities to find work in the industrial plants, black church and club women found the YWCA model of interdenominational work most appealing. In spite of the fact that they were not welcomed as members or participants in local all-white Associations, the critical need to accommodate the migrating population inspired black women to proceed along the same lines as their white counterparts.

When in 1906, the National Board was assembled, their challenge was to reconcile a mission to support, uplift, and serve the material needs of Christian women, including existing Association work, with the fact that most of the membership would oppose any racial intermingling. Therefore, the early existence of black Associations, established and supported by black women, forced the new Board to face the issue of racial diversity immediately after becoming organized. How could the organization justify denying them some form of membership privileges?

As a first step towards a solution, the Board hired Addie Hunton, a former teacher, and wife of the International Secretary for Negro Association Work for the YMCA, to go out and investigate the extent of work already underway among blacks. Hunton was already well known for her club work, as a founding member and organizer for the National Association of Colored Women. This association, along with the experience she had gained in assisting her husband in his work, made her uniquely qualified to fulfill this responsibility. She was knowledgeable and well connected.

After extensive travel for several months, Hunton presented the National Board with a report which recommended that they affiliate four black city Associations and fourteen student organizations. Colored Associations in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Brooklyn, and New York City, were noted as "the only Associations worthy of the name of the Young Women's Christian Association."[5] Prior to that time, City Associations were operating independent from any local or national organization. Rather,

they were the best of a group of parallel organizations and institutions in cities and towns, patterned after white YWCAs.[6]

Hunton also presented a set of recommendations to guide the Association in its work with black women when establishing or affiliating other YWCAs in the black community. Her most important recommendations included: first, that the Board identify and train potential black YWCA Secretaries and leaders; secondly, that "Association work should be limited to cities where provision can be made for permanent and adequate equipment;" and third, where "representative [black] women have fair understanding of needs, purposes and plans." [7]

While Hunton's recommendations recognized the independent work already underway, and clearly supported the notion that the Associations must emanate from efforts in the black community itself, her recommendations also supported the prevailing notion among black club workers, that the special needs of black women could best be managed from within the community. She specifically suggested that "special letters and literature" should be developed as part of the work, and that the effort should be to develop "model" Associations.[8] Taking her cue from the YMCA, which had by then a long history of work among black men, Hunton assumed from the beginning that the women's work would continue in separate facilities, with the most optimal circumstances being a cooperative arrangement with their white counterparts.[9]

Hunton's successor, Elizabeth Ross (Haynes), who was hired to help with the work in 1908, and later became the first black National Board member in 1924, agreed that the idea of establish-

ing model Associations was important. She reported that in some of the other cities, "the work...is not strictly confined to Association work but includes rescue work, Sunday school work, Epworth League work and kindergarten." Also, among college Associations, she observed that "there was a great lack of knowledge and understanding of the Association and its principles."[10] Both seemed to suggest that black women defined the mission of a women's Association more broadly than their white counterparts. For example, their work with young children and the elderly was cited as a distraction from work with young women.[11] Nevertheless, Hunton and Hayes were in agreement that black women were anxious to concentrate their work to conform with YWCA standards in order to be eligible for affiliation with the national movement.

Although the question of how to manage a racially diverse membership proved problematic for the YWCA for most of the twentieth century, there were two immediate concerns to be dealt with during the early years, especially for city Associations. First, the question of how black branches should be affiliated; and secondly, how to provide the necessary training for potential workers in black Associations. In spite of the efforts of some of the black city Associations prior to 1906, white Associations were reluctant to affiliate with their black counterparts. Most often the reason discussed was the fear of additional fiscal responsibility. However, even when this did not seem to be the most compelling issue, social relations were problematic.[12] Likewise, black women were not included in YWCA training opportu-

nities for staff or volunteers, even though there had been some form of training available for white local and student leaders since 1886.[13]

In an attempt to find a way to appease concerned white Southern Association women, National Board President Grace Dodge called a Conference in Asheville, North Carolina in 1907, to which no black women were invited. The purpose was to find a way "to promote the work among colored girls and women." The outcome was a set of recommendations for work in the South which while conceding that "it would be all right to affiliate student Associations already organized and go on organizing... from headquarters [in New York]...but because of the prejudice...it [was]best that no work should be undertaken to promote work [among black women] in cities in the South."[14] This in spite of Association work by blacks reported to be already under way in several Southern cities. Further, the conference recommended to the National Board, that only one Association should exist in a city. This meant that all YWCA work must be part of one single local Association. In effect, black city Associations should affiliate as "branches" of a local "central" (white) Association.

Although the conference dealt only with the Southern situation, the National Board went further to define a way of work for all cities by recommending that, "In certain cities where there is no Central [white] Association, or where the Central Association is weak, or where the organization of a branch is not feasible, if the colored population is sufficiently large and able to support its own work, an Association called the Colored Young

Women's Christian Association shall be organized." However, the National Board added the proviso that " the Association shall be temporarily affiliated with the National Board until such time as it is possible to effect a branch relationship with the local Association. [15] The latter clause became the centerpiece of a policy which was hotly debated for years, between blacks and between black and white women because some contended that nowhere was it explicit that the first Association in a community must be white.[16]

In spite of this contention, the action taken by the Board confirmed both their support for separate Associations, and their intent to locate work among black women under the supervision and control of local white women. As a matter of fact however, in many cases black Associations which became affiliated prior to World War I circumvented the local Board, and worked directly through black National Board staff.[17]

The question of training for black workers and leaders was dealt with in a similarly ambiguous fashion. In spite of Hunton's recommendation to find and train potential black leaders, the Board had no policy to assure the availability of training. Thus,the responsibility was met on a case by case basis by Hunton and Hayes. When the issue of admittance of black women to the National Training School was raised at the National Board in 1909, the resolution was referred to the Secretarial Department, and no immediate action was taken.[18] Finally, in 1911 four black women were enrolled in the training school. Between that time and the beginning of World War I, when special separate training

was formalized, a few black women were admitted each year for summer programs. In each case they were housed outside of the dormitory facilities at the Board headquarters.[19]

By 1913, increasing interest in city work among black women required that the National Board create a full-time position for Colored City Work in it's Department of Method. The choice of Eva Bowles, a black social worker was fortuitous. Bowles, a persistent integration ideologist, can rightfully be credited as the real architect of the interracial movement which emerged later in the century. Shortly after her appointment, she convened a "Sub-Committee on Colored Work," chaired by a National Board member and including a few prominent black women. This interracial effort was only a first step toward her ultimate goal to move the work of black women into the mainstream of the Association.[20]

Bowles' "sub-committee" immediately went to work to plan a second meeting of Southern women in 1915, to try and resolve the troublesome structural race issues. This time representatives of prominent black women's organizations were included. It was hoped that the Second Conference on Colored Work could come up with recommendations which would be agreeable to black and white Southern women. However, just the opposite occurred. When a report of the conference was circulated, the black women who had attended accused the National Board of misrepresenting the points to which they agreed. Still at issue was the question of the relation between black and white Association work. While each side affirmed their "recognition that the best method of coopera-

tion in city Associations is through branch relations," black women claimed that they did not interpret this to mean that this was the only method of work, which they felt that the report implied. They contended that such a structure could make them "hostage" to the whims of whites who did not understand the needs of the black community. [21]The disagreement erupted on the eve of the World War, and though it was suspended during the War years, black club women, led by Lugenia Hope, took up the matter forthwith at the end of the War.

Ironically, the War served as the catalyst for unprecedented growth in work with black women. When America officially entered the War, the YWCA was the only women's agency to receive a war work contract from the government. With at least $200,000 allocated for work with "colored women" out of a budget of over a million dollars, the National Board was finally forced to make a commitment to black Association work.[22] The Association's assignment was to work with women in war-related industries, and to oversee recreation and housing in or near army camps for soldiers and their families. Thus, Bowles as Secretary of Colored Work of the War Work Council was able to organize a mammoth campaign to involve black middle-class women leaders and to cultivate black membership among industrial workers, students, and young girls.

Altogether, the Colored War Work Council established recreation and industrial centers in forty-nine communities, covering twenty-one states and the District of Columbia. It was estimated that over thirty thousand black women benefited during the two year period of the War. Paid membership in black centers soared

to over 12,000.[23] In addition, $200,000, of War Work funds were used to build a badly needed center for black women in Washington, D.C. Bowles also added nine black staff to the National Board headquarters, and three National field workers.

However, regardless of the impressive growth during the War, basic structural issues were yet to be resolved. Black women who became involved, were well aware that many of the gains made in the South during the War were only possible because they were able to work without taking the steps to try and persuade white YWCA leaders to cooperate. This made them more determined than ever to press for more autonomy for their own Associations.

The challenge from local black leaders to eliminate structural and ideological barriers to their work was supported from inside as well as outside of the Association. Internally, the infusion of black staff at the National Board brought new perspectives to the white professionals on the national staff. This is reflected in numerous published speeches by staff members, minutes of staff meetings, National Board publications, and most importantly in the the way that the staff was reorganized over a short period, to place black student and city work into mainstream departments which dealt with all similar work. Although the organization continued to expand along racially separate lines, and black staff continued to relate only to work with black Associations, the prewar attitude of mere tolerance of the efforts of black women evolved to a rationale that suggested that the separate Associations actually helped to maintain race solidarity.[24] The war effort also demonstrated to white women the

abilities of blacks to mobilize and work within the Association. According to Bowles, "the war [gave] the opportunity for the colored woman to prove her ability for leadership. She had her chance and she made good."[25]

The external pressure for the Association to recognize the leadership of black women came mainly as a result of a strategy employed by mostly Southern black women leaders. While they were careful not to jeopardize the work of the War Work Council, the women were determined to have the National Board clarify its policy for affiliation, and the question of participation in decision making at the Regional and National levels. When they failed to get an agreeable response from the YWCA National Board on either issue, they took the matter to their own National Association of Colored Women. Thereafter, leaders proclaimed that they represented not only the black members of the YWCA, but rather, "a body of 300,000 women" who would not be ignored. [26]

The result was a compromise on the principle of branch relations, with black women conceding that the arrangement made financial sense as long as they were in control of their own branch's program, employees, and budget. Furthermore, since the branch relationship plan was used for all manner of special group work, they could anticipate that in the future the Chairman for Colored Work may very well be a black woman. This would then mean a seat on the local Board, as was available for all branch Chairs. Thus the women felt that they had made a beginning towards having significant representation at the local level.[27]

The women also demanded representation on the National

Board, and on Regional Committees, where they could "rightly interpret ...needs and desires as a factor and a force for the uplift of womanhood in the world.[28] To this end, the National Board sponsored a Conference of black women club leaders and national YWCA leaders to discuss the race issue at the National Headquarters. At the meeting, black women again stated their demands and expectations. In the report which followed, it was noted that " white women [from the YWCA] were face to face with candid and logical thinking women and appreciated it." [29]

The events of 1920 marked a watershed in the history of the YWCA. As a result of their persistence, black women forced the YWCA to begin the process of moving from a bi-racial philosophy to interracial relations based on mutual respect. For black middle-class leaders, the organization offerred a step beyond the self-consscious racial infrastructure of the National Association of Colored Women into the larger public arena. While its structure was flawed and racially based, the YWCA provided a forum in which black women could communicate with white women, and at the same time demonstrate their "readiness" to address issues of class, and gender as well as race.

For white women, the benefit was participation in an organization which allowed them to practice a brand of liberal race and gender politics, without giving up control. Moreover, to demonstrate group association was to reinforce the Christian ideal of human understanding. In assessing their work, Mabel Cratty, National General Secretary proudly asserted that the movement could "shape the trend of the stream of the nation."[30] For black

women in the YWCA, separation of the races became a strategy for building leadership within the race, in preparation for the ulltimate goal of integration. It was in their words "a new day for the Negro woman..." [31]

(1). Margaret Murray Washington to Lugenia Burns Hope, Feb. 6, 1920 in Atlanta Union Papers (AUP), Robert Woodruff Library, Atlanta University.

(2). Black women were systematically excluded from membership in organized women's movements during this period. Although they participated in interracial meetings, usually as representatives of their own separate organizations, they were not considered to be "members." See Nancy Cott, Groundings of Modern Feminism, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 68, 69, 72, 87,92-93...

(3). Addie Hunton, "A Brief History of Colored Work," National Board, 1918.

(4) Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Women's Christian Association of Philadelphia. Jan. 18, 1873. Annual Reports 1871-1907. "Highlights of Southwest-Belmonst Y.W.C.A." n.d. Temple University, Urban Archives. Philadelphia Y.W.C.A. papers.

(5) Jane Olcott Walters, "History of Colored Work, 1907-1920. p.3. YWCA National Board Archives, YWCA National Board, New York, N.Y.

(6). To date here is no complete information as to where black YWCA Associations existed between 1906-1911. Addie Hunton and Elizabeth Ross Haynes reported visits to Kansas City, Mo.,St. Louis, Louisville, Dayton, Columbus, Springfield, OH, Topeka, Indianapolis, Richmond, St. Paul, Chattanooga, Mobile, Guthrie, OK, Kansas City, KA, and Jefferson City, OK. There are also references to work in Richmond. Va. However, this list does not include east-coast (nearby to N.Y.) Association work which may have been active and more accessible to headquarters based staff. In Olcott's "History of Colored Work, 1907-1920", p. 13, Hunton and Ross are reported to have split their work between fifteen cities west of the Atlantic Coast, and nine cities in the East.

(7) Ibid. p. 11.

(8). Jane Olcott Walters, "History of Colored Work," Nov.-Dec. 1920, p. 11.

(9) Hunton reported in 1911, that when white women in Richmond approached a colored woman to get together a group of her friends, "they found that these women had already accomplished the thing that the white women had in mind..." She added that "fewer difficulties are met ..when the work is in the hands of a very intelligent group of colored women who are backed by sympathetic cooperation in a white Association." From Walters, p. 11.

(10) ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12). In one account of the Ashville meeting for Southern white

women, it was reported that "the real question was the question of the Convention. It was perfectly clear that if there were colored Associations in the National Association that there would be representation of colored Association in the National. The South was not ready for such representation." In effect, this meant that white women may be faced with the embarrasing possibility of being seated alongside colored women from their city - a social taboo in the "jim crow" South. See "Early Policies Regarding Branches" in a report to the National Board from the Southern Region entitled, "Growth of Southern Work." Nov. 19, 1940.

(13). Elizabeth Wilson, Fifty Years of Association Work Among Young Women: 1866-1916. (New York: National Board YWCA, 1916), p. 191.

(14). "Growth of Southern Work," Report from the Southern Region to the National Board, n.a.November 19, 1940. Microfilm YWCA National Board Archives.

(15).Minutes of the National Board, October 5, 1910. NBA

(16). "A Review of Policies Affecting Organization of Y.W.C.A. Work Among Negro Women," February 2, 1945," by Isobell Lawson. Microfilm Reel No 108, YWCA National Board Archives.

(17). Colored Associations in Dayton, New York City, Brooklyn and Baltimore were described as having "friendly" or cooperating arrangements with the local white Associations. See "The Y.W.C.A. of the City of New York, 1870 to 1920," Ph.D. Dissertation by Helen Bittar, New York University, 1979. Also see Cynthia Neverdon Morton, The Black Woman's Struggle For Equality:1895-1925, (Knoxville:University of Tennessee Press,1989).

(18). Minutes of the National Board , May, 1909.

(19). Olcott, p. 12, and the Report of the Fifth Convention, in "Reports of the Biennial Conventions, 1906-1915, YWCA National Board.

(20).Minutes of the Sub-Committe on Colored Work, Dec. 10, 1913. NBA

(21) Minutes of the meeting of the South Atlantic Field Committee to consider the administration of colored work. July 3, 1920. Neighborhood Union Papers, Lugenia Burns Hope.

(22). Jane Olcott, The Work of Colored Women, YWCA National Board, 1919.

(23) "Reports of the Biennial Conventions, 1920-1928" National Board Archives. YWCA National Board. pp. 26-27.

(24). Isobel C. Lawson, "Negro Women and the Association Idea," The Women's Press, March, 1939. p 119.

(25) Jane Olcott, "The Growth of Our Colored Work," in The Association Monthly, November, 1919, p. 431.

(26) "Minutes of the Conference," April 6, 1920, signed by Lugenia Burns Hope. in Atlanta Union Papers, Woodruff Library, Atlanta University.

(27) "Minutes of the meeting of the South Atlantic Field Committee, Richmond, Virginia, July 5, 1920. In the Atlanta Union Papers, Atlanta University.

(28). This quote is from a news release which followed a Conference sponsored by the National Board, November 23, 1920. n.d.

(29). Ibid.

(30) From the Fifth National Convention, 1915, "Report of the National Board. YWCA National Board Archives.

(31). Ibid.